

JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S "MIDNIGHT IN BOSTON"

By LeRoy Robinson

At Williams College (1910-1914) John Howard Lawson was a member of a group of students who supported Theodore Roosevelt and the Bull Moose Party; he was a "progressive". In the Williams Literary Monthly he wrote political articles criticizing American "dollar diplomacy" and Western imperialism in South America and China. He joined the tiny Socialist Club and gave speeches indicting capitalism as being theoretically and practically unsound. In one scene of *Standards* (1916), his second produced play, he criticized American financiers for exploiting the oil resources of Mexico and for nefariously interfering in Mexican politics. As an ambulance driver in France and Italy during World War I, he hated war. He learned to hate the society that had produced the war, but, although in 1919 he did refuse to join the American Legion (of which his then father-in-law was to become National Commander), he did not think that he could do much to change society. In 1920 he was shocked by the reactionary political atmosphere in the United States symbolized by the Palmer Raids, but he did not feel directly threatened himself. He escaped stifling conformity by returning to France to write. In France he wrote two plays rebellious in mood, *Roger Bloomer* (1923) and *Processional* (1925); and back in New York he wrote *Loud Speaker* (1927) and began *The International* (1928), both plays also rebellious in mood. Yet he had never taken part in any direct political action. He was a talker and an observ-

er. It was not until the mid-1930s that he regularly involved himself in political action.

In his unpublished autobiography John Howard Lawson describes, in a chapter called "Midnight in Boston", how his brief participation in a political demonstration protesting the death sentence in the Sacco-Vanzetti case in 1927 made him reconsider his role as merely an observer of society.¹⁾

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In 1927 John Howard Lawson and his wife Sue were living in a rented house in Mt. Sinai, New York. Lawson's sister Adelaide and her husband Wood Gaylor lived at Glenwood Landing, Long Island. The distance between the two places was about 40 miles, but Lawson and his sister frequently visited each other.

The old house that Lawson lived in (which he and his wife "loved" and wanted to buy) was often crowded with visitors. In the summer of 1927 John Dos Passos spent a lot of time there. Other guests rented nearby bungalows.

The Mt. Sinai weekends were "antic" - - nights of drinking and playing poker and talking. Sometimes the managing committee of the New Playwrights Theatre, of which Lawson was the leader, would have conferences at the Mt. Sinai house.

In mid-1927 Simeon Levy Lawson, John Howard Lawson's 75 year old father, who had retired five years earlier as Reuter's General Manager in the United States and Canada, lay gravely ill, for weeks on the brink of death. Lawson went to visit his father several times a week but did not stay very long : "I cannot feel that

1) The "long martyrdom" of Sacco and Vanzetti began in 1920, when they were accused of the robbery and murder of a shoe company's paymaster.

I met my father's need for love - - or his desire to feel my need of him, which was even more important to him," Lawson writes.²⁾

Lawson's New Playwrights Theatre had just ended its first season and was still struggling to survive. Lawson would tell his father about the troubles the theatre was having. Simeon Levy Lawson listened carefully ("his eyes never leaving my face"), but he could not understand Lawson's avant garde concept of theater. The passion that motivated Lawson was foreign to his father.³⁾ There was a gap between them which the old man recognized and feared.

When Simeon Levy Lawson's health improved, he, as always, tried to avoid being dependent on his children,⁴⁾ and leaving the hospital, he at first moved into a hotel and then to a furnished room near the ocean at Belle Harbor.

John Howard Lawson was then deeply involved in the writing of *The International*, scheduled for production by the New Playwrights Theatre. He was reluctant to spend the long hours necessary to go to Belle Harbor and return, so he did not visit his father often. (Lawson felt guilty about his infrequent visits, but Simeon Levy Lawson never complained.) When he did, the former journalist took his playwright son for walks on the Belle Harbor board-

2) Lawson apparently intended to delete this sentence from his autobiography because he has pencilled it out of his typescript. Throughout his autobiography Lawson expresses feelings of guilt about his relationship with his father. Incidentally, Lawson does not identify the hospital where his father was hospitalized for surgery, nor does he identify the nature of his illness.

3) In Roger Bloomer Roger is a passionate poet who complains about his parents' lack of passion.

4) Adelaide Lawson Gaylor was then expecting her first child ; her interests as an artist were also remote from those of her father.

walk. On their way to the beach they would look at the "stretch of windblown sand" which belonged to the K old man, who thought that this property (ten lots) would someday make his two children rich.⁵⁾

Simeon Levy Lawson had always been a thin man, but now he seemed shrivelled. But his mind was active, and he read the newspapers carefully. He was especially interested in the Soviet Union, about which John Howard Lawson was then negatively critical. The old man knew a great deal about the developing political confrontation between Stalin and Trotsky,⁶⁾ but John Howard Lawson was not then interested in internal politics in the Soviet Union.

Once, the "frail old man with sunken eyes" stopped to watch the rolling breakers. He said : "Lenin is the greatest man of our time". The old man had always been idealistic and progressive (he supported LaFollette in the presidential election of 1924) and after his retirement from Reuter's he expressed his views of American business power more openly.⁷⁾

Simeon Levy Lawson's admiration for Lenin did not bring his rebellious son closer to him. The old man's sober, even didactic faith in socialism did not have much bearing on John Howard Lawson's feeling that American society needed to be cleansed by some "crushing cataclysm" from which a "new creative vision, a green world of artists and dreamers, might emerge".

Lawson was then trying to express this "cloudy prophecy" in

5) This property was lost during the economic depression which began in 1929.

6) Simeon Levy Lawson thought that Trotsky was politically wrong.

7) Simeon Levy Lawson is the prototype of Simeon Fitch, international financier, in *The International*.

The International, whose shape changed while he was writing it, because of the radical effect of the Sacco - Vanzetti case on his thinking.

In the summer of 1927 Lawson was not very much concerned about Sacco and Vanzetti. He thought that the two men were innocent.⁸⁾ But he thought that demonstrating would be unable to help the two condemned men who were to die at midnight on July 10.

Lawson's friend John Dos Passos did go to Boston early in July and participated in a "death watch" picket line in front of the State House. Shortly before midnight on the 10th, Sacco and Vanzetti were reprieved - - until August 22nd. Lawson's faith that demonstrations were of slight value was shaken.

In 1964, Lawson writes : "Sacco and Vanzetti stirred the world, not only by their obvious innocence, but by the dignity with which they faced their accusers. They were revolutionaries who believed in the future of mankind, and their anarchist faith was simple and profound - - a love of people and freedom, hatred of violence".

During the seven years of the imprisonment of Sacco and Vanzetti (1920-1927) Lawson was engaged in a struggle for a "revolutionary" theatre. The theatre "establishment" was part of the system of power which demanded the blood of Sacco and Vanzetti, but Lawson tried not to think about this - - it was "too difficult" and it was "too foreign" to his habit of mind then.

Early in August Lawson received an appeal from the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee : "Come and save Sacco and Vanzetti.

8) "Anyone who studied the evidence, "Lawson says, "could see that the two men were not implicated and were arrested as a result of the hysteria of the Palmer Raids".

This is the final call. They must be saved. The minute Sacco and Vanzetti die there will die also the faith of millions in American justice." This appeal puzzled Lawson. He disliked the wording of the appeal, and he had little faith in American justice, anyway.

Lawson had no intention of going to Boston to participate in any demonstration.

In answer to the same appeal, John Dos Passos did go to Boston. A few days later he sent John Howard Lawson a telegram "begging" him to join him. Lawson discussed this with his wife Sue. He did not want to leave his writing. He wanted to keep himself "free". He wanted to avoid involvement. Sue Lawson did not urge Lawson to go to Boston but she helped him to decide to go. He did not give up his "privacy of feeling" but he went.

In Boston Lawson reported to the headquarters of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee at the Hotel Bellevue on a Sunday morning. He was told to be on the Boston Common that afternoon. He was given a sign and told to hide it under his coat and, when a signal was given, to take it out and show it.

Lawson went to the Common. He saw mounted policemen surrounding the park. On the Common Lawson could not distinguish the people who were going to demonstrate from the many families and strollers enjoying a Sunday outing.

A whistle blew. Everywhere throughout the crowd signs "blossomed" -- Save Sacco and Vanzetti... Sacco and Vanzetti are innocent. The people who had not come to demonstrate were startled at first, but most of them were sympathetic, and some of them applauded. For a moment John Howard Lawson "felt pride, pride in action, in being part of a collective will".

Lawson had assumed that the police would not attack the

sign holders in the midst of the Sunday crowd on the Common. But now he saw the police charge. "They rode down women and children, striking indiscriminately with their clubs in an effort to reach the sign-bearers". Everyone made a "wild effort" to escape. So did Lawson - - but he held up his sign as long as he could, holding it above the melee. As the horsemen came closer, he dropped the sign. He scrambled to escape.

The scene on the Common perplexed Lawson. A gay crowd had been turned into a terror-stricken mass. Lawson had become frightened. This was the first time that he had been confronted by naked police power in the United States. "It seemed to me absurd, Lawson writes. "As absurd as anything I had written in my plays. Because it was all out of proportion to the threat represented by the demonstration. if the authorities reacted in this way... they must be less intelligent than the farcical politicians in *Loud Speaker*".

There was nothing farcical about the situation of Sacco and Vanzetti. They were writing their last letters in the "death house". Even on August 22, execution day, lawyers were appealing to the governor of Massachusetts and to justices of the United States Supreme Court. Outside the Bellevue Hotel picket lines were formed. The protest marchers moved through the streets to the State House. Many scholars, writers and artists participated in this march. As they paraded in front of the capitol building, they were arrested and taken away in police wagons. They, Lawson among them, were imprisoned for several hours, charged with loitering. After they were released, they returned to the capitol, where the picketing continued - - and the arrests.

Lawson stood in the crowd along the street and watched the

last of the pickets, whose line was led by 76-year-old Ellen Hays, a retired Wellesley College mathematics professor, who carried a banner : "Hail Sacco and Vanzetti. The elite of the world greet you as heroes". Lawson felt a kinship with Ellen Hays, who was then arrested and led away. He had a sudden recognition of the contrast between her dignity and the "idiocy" of the state.

That evening Lawson and Dos Passos and some of their friends walked through the streets of Boston, "restlessly, aimlessly". There was nothing more to be done. They waited for midnight. Then they stopped, "silent and stricken", in an alley of the tangled streets of the old town. A clock struck twelve. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed.

In 1964 Lawson says that on August 22, 1927, he did not realize that the midnight bell had tolled for him. He mainly felt helpless. He had a premonition of disaster. He had entered the "halls of history" for a moment. He was appalled by what he saw. He could never be as aloof as he had been before the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Still he had no desire to become involved in further struggle.

For a time he, among others, was involved in a legal test of the validity of his arrest on charges of "loitering". He recalls Arthur Garfield Hayes, his brilliant defense attorney at the group-trial.⁹⁾ Lawson recalls his friend Edna St. Vincent Millay, who, on the witness stand, was asked if she had loitered, and who answered that she had never walked with a more definite purpose in her life. The verdict of "not guilty" was a small victory compared to the

9) Lawson became friends with Hayes and "treasured" his friendship for many years after.

fate of Sacco and Vanzetti.

A few months after the execution, Mike Gold, an associate of Lawson's in the New Playwrights Theatre, wrote that the two executed men would become a legend : "This is a beautiful fate. It cheats the grave of its darkness." Mike Gold was proved right, Lawson says, but at the time, for Lawson and for many other intellectuals, the "grave possessed its victims and the darkness was frightening".

At his trial Vanzetti said : "Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man, as we do now by accident". Vanzetti saw the future, Lawson says, and Sacco and Vanzetti "may have had more influence on the culture of the 1930s than any artist or philosopher".

Lawson's immediate response to the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti was negative. Alienation was too strong in him to permit an assurance of brotherhood. He returned home and wrote the last act of *The International* : "I made it an apocalyptic vision of world destruction".

The outcome of the Sacco and Vanzetti case wrought a change in the character of the New Playwrights Theatre. John Howard Lawson and John Dos Passos and Mike Gold and the others moved toward a more rebellious position.

They began the second season of their theatre at their Cherry Lane Playhouse by raising the red flag in front of it.